

Rajdharma: From Kautilya's Arthashastra to Constitutional Morality in Modern India

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Abstract

The research paper explores Kautilya's Arthashastra to study Rajdharma and its development into the ethical principles which underpin contemporary Indian democracy and constitutional governance. The study analyzes how Dharma-based moral law and social order from ancient Indian traditions continues to shape governance principles through the examination of classical Indian texts and modern thinkers Gandhi, Nehru, Radhakrishnan, Granville Austin, Rajeev Bhargava, and Upendra Baxi. The paper shows Kautilya's Rajdharma establishes the king's duty through righteous and disciplined leadership that protects his people. Yet the Indian Constitution creates a new interpretation of this concept through constitutional morality which upholds justice and equality and accountability. The research shows that Indian governance throughout history has followed an unchanging moral principle which requires states to achieve sovereignty through adherence to Dharma-based ethical duties and devotion to public welfare.

Keywords: Rajdharma, Kautilya, Arthashastra, Dharma, Statecraft, Ethics, Indian Constitution, Democracy, Duty, Justice, etc.

Introduction

Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* is a compendium of timeless wisdom relating to every aspect of governance, with particular emphasis on the art of diplomacy and statecraft. It consists of fifteen books (pañcadaśa adhyāyāḥ), of which Books I, II, and III specifically deal with the concepts of discipline (vinaya), the duties of government superintendents (adhyakṣa-dharma), and law (dharmasthīya or vyavahāra). The text comprises 15 books, 150 chapters (adhikaraṇāni), 180 sections (prakaraṇāni), and approximately 6,000 verses (ślokas).¹

The concept of Rajdharma occupies a pivotal place in *Kautilya's Arthashastra*. The king remains bound to follow the principles of Dharma and must lend his ears to his ministers, reinforcing the principle that sovereignty is possible only through collective assistance. A single wheel can never move; hence, the ruler must employ ministers and hear their opinions.²

Methodology

The research uses a textual analytical method to examine how Rajdharma developed from

¹ Radhakumud Mookerji, *Chandragupta Maurya and His Times*, 2nd ed., Sir William Meyer Lectures, 1940–41 (Delhi: Rajkamal Publications, n.d.), 8.

² Ibid., 18.

ancient Indian statecraft into contemporary constitutional moral principles by tracking ethical principles throughout history. The research applies an interpretive approach which focuses on textual ideas and moral principles and duties instead of using empirical methods.

The Concept of Dharma

Dharma is described as the matrix of fundamental principles governing both individual and collective life. It is not confined to transcendental realization but serves as the rule for right living within the material world. The moral and practical basis of this system helps people achieve the *puruṣārthas* which include *artha* for material success and *kāma* for desire fulfillment and *mokṣa* for liberation while serving as the fundamental force that maintains cosmic order. The practice of Dharma requires human beings to follow it for their actions to achieve positive results because it establishes the necessary connection between individual liberty and moral duty.³

According to ancient thought, Dharma represents the force which sustains life in balanced harmony among all organisms (*dhāraṇāt dharmah*), as well as the path that produces current and future happiness (*yato 'bhudaya-nihśreyasa-siddhiḥ*), and the prescriptions of moral guidelines and religious texts (*codanā-lakṣano arthāt dharmah*).⁴ The concept operates as both moral conduct and cosmic regulation which protects the welfare of human beings and their communities and the entire world as a unit. Dharma functions as the fundamental element that supports the world along with morality and upholds all things—*Dharma viśvasya jagataḥ pratiṣṭhā*—“Dharma is the foundation of the world.”⁵

In the Manusmṛiti, the ancient law book of India, while explaining the meaning of Dharma, Manu outlines the principles of Dharma, which are essentially moral principles for maintaining social order. Dharma is defined in several parts of the Manusmṛiti, but it is most extensively discussed in the first chapter, which establishes the concept of Dharma, and in Chapter 6, which outlines the ten principles of Dharma. Chapter 7 discusses Rājadharma, the duties and laws related to kingship and governance.⁶

Ten Principles of Dharma in Manusmṛiti

1. **Dhṛti** (दृति) – Patience, steadfastness, self-restraint
2. **Kṣamā** (क्षमा) – Forgiveness
3. **Dama** (दम) – Control of the senses
4. **Asteya** (अस्तेय) – Non-stealing; refraining from taking what is not given
5. **Śauca** (शौच) – Purity (of mind and body)
6. **Indriyanigraha** (इन्द्रियनिग्रह) – Mastery over the senses
7. **Dhi** (धी) – Discernment, wisdom, right understanding
8. **Vidyā** (विद्या) – Knowledge

³ Arvind Kumar Rai, “The Concept of Dharma,” *Journal of East-West Thought* 9, no. 1 (2019): 19–20.

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶ Manusmṛiti, compiled by Sri Manish Tyagi, SHDVEF edition, Chapter VI, Couplet 92, p. 244, available at: <https://www.shdvef.com>

9. Satya (सत्य) – Truthfulness

10. Akrodha (अक्रोध) – Absence of anger.⁷

These are considered the foundational ethical virtues that shape righteous behaviour.

Kautilya's Concept of Rajdharma

In the first book of Arthashastra, Chapter 19, “The Duties of a King,” Kautilya provides a detailed explanation of the concept of Rajdharma.⁸ Kautilya demonstrates that royalty should not be viewed as an entitlement since it demands both vigilance and moral leadership. The behavior of his subjects directly reflects the actions of the ruler because a diligent sovereign will inspire diligence while a dangerous monarch will produce dangerous conduct among his people. The welfare of the public depends on the ruler’s personal discipline because a leader who is negligent at the top will create confusion leading to outside threats.⁹

Kautilya explains that leadership demands constant vigilance and devotion to public duties. The organized daily schedule of this man consists of eight work and rest periods that alternate between day and night. The specific timeline serves as an indication of fundamental royal authority because it demonstrates the continuous obligation of serving the community. The alertness of the ruler reflects his moral vigilance as his unbroken concentration on state administration demonstrates the religious responsibilities essential for leading others.¹⁰

The fundamental requirement for *Rajdharma* exists in the form of accessibility and accountability principles. Kautilya explains that a ruler who distances himself from people while surrendering all power to officials will bring about business chaos and public discontent.¹¹ The ruler must personally attend to the grievances of his subjects and maintain direct contact with the affairs of his kingdom. The distance between leaders and their people leads to moral decay because when kings become unreachable they create the conditions for corrupt governance which eventually results in public protests.

The other required aspect of *Rajdharma* is the ethical and compassionate outflow of responsibilities. Kautilya stresses that the king himself is supposed to take care of the well-being of Brahmans, ascetics, the elderly, the sick, the helpless, women as well as even animals.¹² These obligations are an expression of the larger Indian concept that government is a kind of moral trust, in which the ruler is the protector of both order (*dharma*) and compassion (*karuna*). Urgent cases cannot be left to be solved later, delayed justice or duty ignored by the kingship goes against the very nature of righteous kingship.

Another interpretation of traditional religious notions which Kautilya adapts to the political existence of a king is also seen. He says, that the religious vow of a ruler is his willingness to action, his performance of sacrifice is the satisfactory discharge of his duties, and his offering

⁷ Ibid.,

⁸ Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*, trans. R. Shamastry (Mysore: Government Press, 1915), 50–52.

⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰ Ibid., 50-51.

¹¹ Ibid., 51.

¹² Ibid., 51.

of fees and ablution is his paying equal attention to all his subjects.¹³ Rajdharma, in this opinion, is not distinct at all of religion, its highest political form: duty takes the place of rite, and the service of the people becomes the spiritual service of the ruler

Kautilya's maxim "in the happiness of his subjects the king's happiness is attained, and in their welfare his welfare is attained" conveys the essence of, Rajdharma, and the crown's obligations.¹⁴ While the king's satisfaction may be of the upmost importance, the king's good is not the good to be sought. This is what transcends Rajdharma from a political pragmatic approach to an idealistic selfless governance pattern of selfless governance. The justification of royal power is the welfare of the people (*praja-sukha*) and the consolidation of power through Dharmic means.

Kautilya again states, "Nothing is as active as wealth and virtue, and nothing ruins wealth and virtue as inaction." A dispassionate approach to one's duties will ensure decay of what has been and what may be achieved, while one's incessant approach to their duties will ensure prosperity and stability of empires and the state.¹⁵ A righteous king works tirelessly, in both action and inaction and maintains an active vigil, through the principles of both benevolence and vigilance.

Kautilya's Rajdharma is the unit of moral virtue and political wisdom. It describes the ruler as a trustee of the collective welfare and not a sovereign, and that ruler's dharma rests on the prosperity, security, and happiness of his people.

The King as Danda or Upholder of Dharma

In ancient India, kingship was understood differently. A ruler was not just a political sovereign, but also a keeper of Dharma. Dharma is the moral law that prevails and maintains the social and cosmic order. Vedic texts refer to a king as "*Dharmasya goptā*"—defender of righteousness, protector of justice.¹⁶ *Aitareya Brahmana* texts talked about a king being a guardian of Dharma. In the *Śatapatha Brahmana*, the importance of Danda or punitive authority, is explained as a means to justice order, "the strong do not devour the weak."¹⁷

This concept is repeated in the *Mahābhārata*; this text says that in the absence of *Danda*, society is reduced to *Matsya Nyāya*, or the law of the fish, in which "people devour one another like fish or dogs." It follows that political authority is needed to stave off social disorder and to maintain a moral arrangement in which the weak are defended and the orderly distribution of resources is achieved. In the *Arthaśāstra*, Kautilya argues that without a ruler wielding *Danda*, the powerful will devour the powerless; but a king's protection allows even the weak to prosper.¹⁸ To him, *Danda* was not tyranny legally defined, but a moral necessity. It was the ethical function of kingship. The king who rules in alignment with Dharma preserves the joy and happiness of his subjects while simultaneously attaining their moral and

¹³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁴ Ibid., 52.

¹⁵ Ibid., 52.

¹⁶ Radhakumud Mookerji, *Chandragupta Maurya and His Times*, 2nd ed., Sir William Meyer Lectures, 1940–41 (Delhi: Rajkamal Publications, n.d.), 51.

¹⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸ Ibid., 51.

spiritual merit.¹⁹

Kautilya also asserts that the sovereign's temporal authority is not absolute. The sovereign has to be mindful of Dharma, the law of nature, and the customs and standards of the population they rule; even the sovereign must adhere to a moral law when resorting to Danda, an action of punishment.²⁰ Even the sovereign who exercises *Danda* remains subject to moral law. As stated in the *Arthashastra*, if a king punished an innocent man, the king would have to pay thirty times the amount; thus, Dharma is above the temporary authority of the sovereign.²¹

This is the reason there is even a counter principle to unethical behavior to sovereign power. To translate this into a general idea, Dharma is the only true authority of sovereignty: "the law of rule is the king of men." The ruler has the most honor and is just when they rule through truth and compassion.

Gandhi's Moral Politics and the Modern Rajdhama

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) was an important figure in the development of moral philosophy; he was a leader in the Indian Nationalist movement and combined his political thoughts with non-violence and self-discipline, which produced a theory of governance based on duties to society and truth.

Gandhi felt that political morality "is drawn from a number of sources—the subject matter, the means of act or conduct—if all three are not related to duty, love, and truth."²² Similar to Kautilya, Gandhi viewed political authority as a matter of moral obligation—not someone's personal right. Both perspectives of legitimate political authority are predicated upon moral obligation (Dharma) with regard to self-control for the benefit of the common good.

Gandhi articulated this in what Parel calls "spiritual warfare," "to make the moral good reign in human affairs."²³ This is very similar to Kautilya's position that a king should not rule through fear, but wise (Dharma) self-control. An ethical government emerges out of this notion of inner self-restraint—for Gandhi swaraj; for Kautilya, ātma-vijaya—that establishes political justice. Gandhi's argument that "true home-rule is self-rule or self-control," is similar to Kautilya's idea that a tyrant cannot rule well and destroys both himself and his subjects.²⁴

Nehru's Dharma, Democracy, and the Modern Rajdhama

Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) was a leader of modern-day India and the first Prime Minister. He developed a vision of democracy based upon moral unity through ethical principles, advocating for secularism and constitutional law.

In tune with the old tradition, Nehru also defines Dharma as more than religion and shares his own perspective:

¹⁹ Ibid., 51.

²⁰ Ibid., 51.

²¹ Ibid., 51.

²² Anthony J. Parel, "The Political Theory of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*," *Asian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1969): 290.

²³ Ibid., 290.

²⁴ Ibid., 291.

"Dharma means something even more than religion; it is derived from a root word meaning to hold together; it is the inmost constitution of a thing; the law which is its inner being. It is an ethical concept; it comprehends the moral code, righteousness and the entire set of duties and obligations of man."²⁵

This moral essence — law that holds together — underpins his view of politics. The political vision voiced by Nehru states that it is India's democracy that ought to rest on ethical unity instead of sectarian majorities or asymmetries of force imposed on the polity. As Nehru observed "we trained the people of India in democratic ways." The Indian National Congress "was certainly one of the most democratic organizations in the world in both theory and practice."²⁶

Nehru's view of democratic rule as a moral obligation in support of unity and justice closely parallels the political concept of 'Dharma' articulated by Kautilya in *Rajdharma* — a form of governance sustained and justified by duty (Dharma) and the welfare of the people. In modern terms, *Rajdharma* only exists in the constitutional sense for the Indian state and in its ideal democratic form as both a moral and political order that "holds together" Indian society through Justice, equality and collective responsibility.

Radhakrishnan's Ethical Dharma and the Moral Foundation of Social Order

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) was both a philosopher-statesman and the President of India and was well-known for interpreting Indian philosophical traditions, specifically Dharma, as providing ethical guidelines for both social and political living.

Radhakrishnan elaborates that the goal of Dharma in Hindu thought "is to take the natural life of man and subject it to regulation, without excessive interference with its vastness, freedom, and diversity."²⁷ He makes a distinction between varna-dharma (responsibilities according to social position) and āśrama-dharma (responsibilities according to stage of life); both types of Dharma are structured around an alignment of spiritual growth and social stability. This moral equilibrium is an integration of cosmic purposes with human purposes—"there is a deep integration of the social destiny with that of the individual."²⁸

This kind of ethical reckoning is similar to Kautilya's *Rajdharma*, where the chief officer has a responsibility to sustain order (Dharma) through sanctioned and also regulated violence, rather than arbitrary violence. Radhakrishnan's formulation is directly applicable to the contemporary context of democracy: civil government, like Dharma, must "subject liberty to regulation" in the interests of the common good and to transcend both the freedom of action of civil government and also to transcend moral reasoning itself.²⁹ In the Constitution of India, this is echoed in the Directive Principles of State Policy, which is where political action reaches its justification in ethical advancement.

Granville Austin and the Moral Vision of the Constitution

²⁵ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 74

²⁶ Ibid., 383–384.

²⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 355.

²⁸ Ibid., 356.

²⁹ Ibid., 372.

Granville Austin (1928-2010) was an American Author and Constitutional Scholar; his work presented the Constitution of India as a document that would change society through the provision of social justice and equality.

Granville Austin points out that the Indian Constitution is "first and foremost, a social document," grounded on the moral ideas of justice, equality, and responsibility.³⁰ It was designed not merely as a legal framework but as an instrument for social transformation—"the conscience of the Constitution."³¹ The Directive Principles of State Policy - and let me emphasize they are not decorative - provide the moral basis for governance that obliges the state to insure social and economic justice.

Austin calls attention to the fact that these principles "lay out the humanitarian socialist precepts that were, and are, the goals of the Indian social revolution."³² They make it the duty of governments to find a "middle way between individual liberty and the public good," uniting personal rights with collective welfare.³³ This vision parallels Kautilya's *Rajdharma*, where the ruler's legitimacy arises from adherence to *Dharma*—governance for the welfare of all (*sarvabhūta-hita*).

Rajeev Bhargava: The Constitution as a Moral Text and Ethical Rajdharma

Rajeev Bhargava (b.1954) is a well-known scholar and theorist in India whose research concerns constitutional ethics, secularism and how the ethical base of democracy fits into the context of India.

Constitutions should be viewed not only as legal documents, but as moral writings that speak to an ethical foundation.³⁴ In India, the Constitution is a set of "values and ideals" circumscribed as "the moral compass of governance," promoting liberty, equality, and fraternity in a pluralistic society.³⁵ Bhargava offers guidance on the same question as a normative framework for right action, which now takes the form of *Rajdharma*—the righteous duty of governance laid out in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*.

In "The Constitution as a Statement of Indian Identity," Bhargava states that the Preamble embodies justice, liberty and equality and fraternity as moral principles, much like the dharmic obligations of ancient kings.³⁶ The Directive Principles also encompass a strong egalitarian emphasis on the state's duty to work towards economic and social justice. This is where *Dharma* is manifest; it becomes constitutional ethics, *Rajdharma* revived as democratic duty, the responsibility of rulers and citizens alike to restore moral order through governance.

Upendra Baxi and the Constitutional Rajdharma

Upendra Baxi (b.1938) is a highly respected scholar of the Indian Constitution, known for his

³⁰ Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 75.

³¹ Ibid., 76.

³² Ibid., 77.

³³ Ibid., 192-193.

³⁴ Rajeev Bhargava, *Politics and Ethics of the Indian Constitution* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4-5.

³⁵ Ibid., 6-7.

³⁶ Ibid., 47-48.

work in Constitutional and Legal Theory, which seeks to define constitutional morals, human rights and the moral limits of State.

Upendra Baxi interprets the Basic Structure Doctrine (BSD) as the modern embodiment of Rajdharma—the moral limits of sovereign power. He writes that all constitutional powers are “plenary powers supreme within their decisional domains,” yet each is “limited and accountable according to the BSD limits.”³⁷ No institution—legislature, executive, or judiciary—may claim absolute sovereignty. This principle of auto-limitation ensures that authority remains morally and constitutionally bound.

Baxi explicitly connects this modern constitutional restraint to ancient Indian thought:

“In ancient times, the classical Hindu notions of dharma also emphasised the notion of sovereignty within the mediating concepts like Rajdharma and Praja Dharma, further reinforcing virtues such as Sanyam, Vivek, and Niyama.”³⁸

He interprets the Basic Structure Doctrine as a continuation of India’s ethical-political tradition, where governance is guided by self-restraint, wisdom, and justice. In this sense, the Constitution’s moral authority reflects the ancient Rajdharma: rule bound by duty, not desire; sovereignty limited by law, not will.

Conclusion

Kautilya’s Arthashastra to the Indian Constitution illustrates how Rajdharma has transitioned from an ethical code of kingship to a constitutional moral landscape of governance. Over the centuries the principle remains unchanged: authority is only valid when the ruler observes it through the moral boundaries of Dharma—justice, obligation, and collective welfare. Gandhi’s self-rule, Nehru’s moral democracy, Radhakrishnan’s ethical order, Austin’s constitutional morality, Bhargava’s moral text, and Baxi’s doctrine of restraint provide the living continuum of Rajdharma in modern times in India. The true sovereign, as Kautilya and the Constitution remind us, is not power, but Dharma itself.

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³⁷ Upendra Baxi, “Foreword: Understanding the Mystery and Miracle of the Basic Structure,” *NUJS Law Review* 16, no. 4 (2023): 2.

³⁸ Ibid., 3.

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